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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3480>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.3480

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2015

Number of pages: 140-141

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Sarah Gruszka, "Blockade (*blokada*)", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 121 | 2015, Online since 01 October 2016, connection on 05 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3480> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.3480>

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Words of Testimony and of Memory

Because researchers, professors and professionals working in the arts, culture or news are more and more often needing to use words from the fields of testimony and of memory, *Testimony Between History and Memory* has set itself the objective of gathering them into a dictionary, thus opening up this experimental space. One word can take on different meanings depending on the language it is used or circulates in. This is why certain terms of the dictionary will be approached in a multilinguistic, or even in a multicultural way.

This project will be realized in two stages. Each term from an index in progress will be presented twice. First in the form of short notices in each edition of the review, then inviting developments and a critical debate, with multiple voices, on a website that will start running from the Summer 2015. We will associate to their short version, voluntarily incomplete, a few book titles, however not claiming to be exhaustive.

- 1 The word “blokada” signifies in this case the siege of Leningrad by Hitler’s armies between September 1941 and January 1944. Two and a half months after the invasion of the Soviet Union – a “blitzkrieg” lasting four months – the Germans had already arrived at the gates of the former St Petersburg. Rather than trying to conquer, they decided to refuse surrender, eliminating the population by starving and “wiping the city off the face of the earth”. Cut off from all sources of food and fuel, the people of Leningrad underwent the longest siege endured by a modern city, lasting nearly 900 days. It killed nearly one million civilians, a third of the pre-war Leningrad population, with famine being the leading cause of death.

- 2 The term now seems obvious to characterize one of the most tragic and deadliest episodes of the Second World War, emblematic of the type of conflict envisioned by the Nazis: total annihilation. It also produced a derivative term to label Leningrad's beleaguered inhabitants and survivors, "*blokadniki*". In Soviet historiography and official discourse, however, its use was considered undesirable for nearly half a century. Indeed, the drawback is of explicitly referring to the catastrophic situation into which the people were plunged. Positive expressions are preferred, such as "defence" (*orborona*) or "exploit" (*podvig*) of Leningrad. These euphemistic terms are used to deliver a more palatable version of the story of the siege, which has been relieved of its darker aspects in line with the gesture of the "Great Patriotic War". They refer to the active resistance of the city, while "blockade" or "siege" (*osada*) emphasize an undesirable situation, arising from a hugely shameful military failure. By extension, these two terms suggest a form of passivity – a highly despised stance in Soviet ideology. Not least, the term "defence" refers to a strictly military episode, obscuring the fact that the siege mainly affected civilians. Yet this constitutes the uniqueness of Leningrad's tragedy.
- 3 These issues ultimately reflect how the history of the siege was reinterpreted by Soviet propaganda, which succeeded in transforming this historic disaster into a glorious and heroic saga, thereby obliterating the question of the responsibility of power. As soon as survivors' voices were able to penetrate the public consciousness and researchers began to build a more complete picture of the siege of Leningrad, the word "blockade", hitherto confined to the private sphere, became widespread. It was not until 1989 that the State Memorial Museum of Leningrad Defence, the repository of the history and memory of the *blokadniki*, added "blockade" to its name. Today, thanks to the opening of archives and the disappearance of censorship, the undisputed hegemony of the term "blockade" goes hand in hand with a reappropriation of this story, whose tragic realities such as cannibalism, are well known. The certain continuity of the mythologized version and the revival of sacralization of the "Great Patriotic War" observed in Russia in recent years renders the study of this period sensitive and not without controversy.

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